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AUTHOR Gillis, M. K.; Olson, Mary W.
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ABSTRACT

Experienced teachers enrolled in two graduate reading classes examined seven informal reading inventories (IRIs)--three at the elementary level and four at the secondary level--to (1) discover what text types (narrative or expository) they used at each level to measure student comprehension skills and determine instructional levels and (2) identify the rhetorical structures used in expository passages. The 18 teachers who rated the elementary passages and the 20 who rated the secondary ones had all previously administered IRIs and had studied the literature on text type and structure and reading comprehension. Each teacher examined at least four IRIs, classified each passage used in them as narrative or expository, judged each narrative passage as well- or poorly-formed, and judged each expository passage according to rhetorical structures adapted from B. J. F. Meyer (1975). The teachers found that all of the preprimer and primer passages used on the IRIs were narrative, while most of the other elementary passages were narrative and most of the secondary passages expository. In addition, they found that many of the narrative passages on the IRIs were not well-formed, and that approximately one-eighth of the elementary and one-fourth of the secondary expository passages had no clear rhetorical structure. The findings suggest that the passages used on IRIs might produce erratic comprehension scores. In light of these findings, five practical suggestions are offered for teachers and diagnosticians who use the currently available commercial IRIs. (FL)

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Informal Reading Inventories & Text Type/Structure

M. K. Gillis

Mary W. Olson

Southwest Texas State University

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Running head: IRIS AND TEXT TYPE

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Abstract

Classroom teachers enrolled in two graduate reading classes looked at informal reading inventories to see what text types, narrative or expository, were represented at various levels; to determine whether or not narrative passages were well-formed; and to identify the rhetorical structures of the expository passages. This article briefly reviews the research on the effects of text type and structure on comprehension; tells what the teachers found; and makes suggestions for choosing and using informal reading inventories.

Elementary IRIs: Do They Reflect What We Know about Text Type/Structure and Comprehension?

Informal reading inventories (IRIs) contain word lists and series of graded passages and questions. Teachers ask students to read the passages and answer the questions in order to determine the level of materials a student should use in the reading or content classroom. In a recent survey the overwhelming majority of teachers questioned indicated that they were familiar with and knew how to administer IRIs, and over half said they used IRIs in their classrooms (Masztal & Smith, 1984).

Research on IRIs began in the 1950s and has continued to the present. Research concerns related to assessing comprehension with IRIs have included the number and type of questions which should be asked, the passage dependency/independeny of questions; and, the effects of interest upon comprehension scores.

Recent research on the effects of text type and text structure on comprehenson suggest other areas of concern for those who use and study IRIs. Story grammars have been formulated to describe the organization of narrative passages (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Children and adults appear to use their knowledge of the organization of stories, or their story schemas, to understand and remember stories (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Older readers and better readers have more well developed story schemas than younger readers and poorer readers (Hansche & Gordon, 1983; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Children as young as five have a basic story schema and can use it to understand stories they hear (Stein & Glenn, 1979).

The organizational patterns, or rhetorical structures, that characterize expository passages have also been delineated (Meyer, 1975). Adults and children who are aware of the various organizational patterns in expository texts use this awareness to comprehend and recall what they

read (Englert & Hiebert, 1984; Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth, 1980). Again, older readers and better readers have better knowledge of expository text structures (Taylor, 1980). Awareness of the rhetorical structures of expository text develops later than awareness of the structure of narrative texts, perhaps beginning at about third grade level (Englert & Hiebert, 1984).

The use of text structure appears to be a necessary strategic skill in understanding and recalling text (Anderson, 1977; Meyer, 1975). Therefore, it is a skill we would want to assess when using IRIs to evaluate student's reading skills and judge the level of materials they should use for classroom instruction. To do so we should present students with IRI passages that are well-formed and ask questions about important elements in narratives and organizational patterns in expositions. To place elementary students in basals, which contain mostly narrative selections, IRI passages which are well-formed narratives are needed. To place secondary students in appropiate textbooks, expository passages that are well-organized and represent the variety of rhetorical structures such texts contain are needed.

Inventories Examined for Text Type/Structure

Experienced teachers enrolled in two graduate reading classes examined four IRIs at the elementary level and three IRIs at the secondary level to see what text types and structures were being used on these tests to judge student comprehension skills and determine instructional levels. These teachers were experienced in administering IRIs and had studied the literature on text type/strucutre and reading comprehension. Both classes spent a class period reviewing text type/structure and examining one form of an IRI for practice. Eighteen teachers rated the elementary (PP-6) passages and 20 students rated the secondary (7-12+) passages. Each

teacher examined at least four inventories, and each inventory was examined by at least 8 teachers. Passages examined were form 1 or form A of: (a) Basic Reading Inventory (Johns, 1978); (b) Classroom Reading Inventory (Silvaroli, 1979); (c) Analytic Reading Inventory (Woods & Moe, 1977); (d) Informal Reading Assessment (Burns & Roe, 1980); (e) Advanced Reading Inventory (Johns, 1981); and the English, social studies, and science forms of (f) Content Inventories (McWilliams & Rakes, 1979).

The teachers classified each passage of the IRIs as narrative or expository. They classified a passage as a narrative if it was a story about actual or fictional events; an exposition if it was the presentation of information. Next they judged each narraive passage as well-formed or poorly-formed. They judged a narrative as well-formed if it was a complete episode containing or implying information about (a) setting, (b) initiating event or problem, (c) goal, (d) attempts to achieve the goal and consequences of those attempts, and (e) a resolution and reaction (Pearson, 1982). Finally, they classified each exposition by rheorical structures adapted from Meyer (1975). These were (a) listing/description, (b) definition/example, (c) cause/effect, (d) sequence, (e) problem/solution, (f) comparision/contrast, and (g) unable to tell.

Results

The teachers classified the preprimer and primer level passages on these inventories as narrative 100% of the time. They classified first, second, and third grade level passages as narrative 76.3% of the time and expository 23.7% of the time. They classified fourth, fifth, and sixth grade level passages as narrative 51.9% of the time and expository 48.1% of the time; and secondary passages as narrative 18% of the time and expository 82% of the time. They classified some of the passages as narrative and some of the passages as expository on all of the inventories

they examined.

They judged the elementary narrative passages to be well-formed 52% of the time, and the secondary narrative passages to be well-formed 82% of the time. Table 1 shows the percentage of times passages were judged to be well-formed and poorly-formed by inventory. It also shows that the high percentage of well-formed passages at the seconday level comes from the teachers agreeing that the narratives on the Content Inventory were all well-formed.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

They classified the elementary expository passages as to rhetorical structure as follows: listing/discription 16.6%, definition/example 28%, cause/effect 3.5%, sequence 10.5%, problem/solution 17.3%, comparison/contrast 7.5%, and as unable to tell 16.6%. They classified he secondary expository passages as to rhetorical structure as follows: listing/description 19.8%, definition/example 20.2%, cause/effect 10.2%, sequence 9.5%, problem/solution 6.1%, comparison/contrast 9.1%, and unable to tell 25.1%.

Discussion

The teachers found that all of the pre-primer and primer passages were narrative, most of the other elementary passages narrative, and most of the secondary passages expository. Still, they did find a mix of text types on all of the inventories starting at the first grade level. This switching between text types on an inventory might cause students' comprehension scores to fluctuate because narratives are easier to understand than expositions (Berkowitz & Taylor, 1981; Olson, 1985).

The teachers found that many of the narrative passages on these

inventories were not well-formed. When they looked at the expository passages, they found they found that approximately one-eighth of the elementary passages and one-fourth of the secondary passages had no clear rhethorical structure. Readers who use the organizational pattern of the text to aid in comprehension and recall could not use that strategy on many of the passages in these IRIs. This might result in such readers achieving erratic comprehension scores - high on well-organized selections and low on poorly-organized selections. If such readers scored poorly on a series of poorly-organized passages, invalid and depressed instructional levels might result. In addition, the teachers found that the expository passages on these IRIs were not well-balanced in terms of the rhetorical structures included.

In light of these findings, teachers and diagnosticians who use the commercial IRIs currently available are advised to:

1. If possible, select inventories which have mostly narrative selections for placing elementary students in basal materials because most basal selections are narrative. Select inventories which have mostly expository selections for secondary level students because most of what they are required to read is expository textbooks.
2. If possible, select inventories in which most of the narrative selections are well-formed. If not, use the forms of the inventory with the most well-organized passages. Select expository inventories in which the passages have discrenable structures and in which the passages are balanced among the various rhetorical structures.
3. When a passage on the form you are using is poorly-organized or not of the appropriate text type for your purpose, use a

passage at the same level from an alternate form. If an appropriate alternative passage is not available, rewrite a passage from the inventory or write an appropriate passage.

4. When a student's comprehension scores are erratic from level to level, examine the passages to see if the cause could be switches between types of text or well and poorly-organized passages. If this seems to be the case, adjust your estimate of instructional level appropriately. That is, base instructional level on the student's performance on well-formed passages of the appropriate text structure for your purpose.
5. Finally, remember that the instructional level you find is just an estimate. Confirm it by observing the student's performance with classroom materials. Adjust placement if necessary.

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Table 1

Percentage of Times Narrative Passages Judged Well-Formed and Poorly-Formed by Inventory

Inventory*	Well-Formed	Poorly-Formed
BRI	47	53
CRI	35	65
Anal	70	30
IRA(P-6)	56	44
IRA(7-12+)	44	56
Adv	67	33
ContE	100	0
ContS	100	0
ContSS	100	0

*BRI- Basic Reading Inventory

CRI- Classroom Reading Inventory

Anal- Analytic Reading Inventory

IRA- Informal Reading Assessment

Adv- Advanced Reading Inventory

ContE- Content Inventories , English

ContS- Content Inventories , Science

ContSS- Content Inventories , Social Studies